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ABSTRACT

Research on adult learning shows that there is no decline in ability to learn as people get older, that except for minor considerations such as hearing and vision loss, the age of the adult learner is not a major factor in language acquisition, and that the context in which adults learn is the major influence on their ability to acquire a new language. Contrary to popular stereotypes, older adults can be good foreign language learners. The difficulties older adults often experience in the language classroom can be overcome through adjustments in the learning environment, attention to affective factors, and use of effective teaching techniques and approaches. (Author/MSE)

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ERIC DIGEST

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Prepared by Mary Schleppegrell

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ERIC CLEARINGHOUSE ON LANGUAGES AND LINGUISTICS

ERIC Digest

The Older Language Learner

Prepared by Mary Schleppegrell

September 1987

Can older adults successfully learn foreign languages? Recent research is providing increasingly positive answers to this question. The research shows that:

- there is no decline in the ability to learn as people get older;
- except for minor considerations such as hearing and vision loss, the age of the adult learner is not a major factor in language acquisition;
- the context in which adults learn is the major influence on their ability to acquire the new language.

Contrary to popular stereotypes, older adults can be good foreign language learners. The difficulties older adults often experience in the language classroom can be overcome through adjustments in the learning environment, attention to affective factors, and use of effective teaching techniques and approaches.

Aging and Learning Ability

The greatest obstacle to older adult language learning is the doubt in the minds of both learner and teacher that older adults can learn a new language. Most people assume that "the younger the better" applies in language learning. However, numerous studies have shown that this is not true. Studies comparing the rate of second language acquisition in children and adults have shown that although children may have an advantage in achieving native-like fluency in the long run, adults actually learn languages more quickly than children in the early stages (Krashen, Long, & Scarcella, 1979). These studies indicate that attaining a working ability to communicate in a new language may actually be easier and more rapid for the adult than for the child.

Studies on aging have demonstrated that learning ability does not decline with age. If older people remain healthy, their intellectual abilities and skills do not decline (Ostwald and Williams, 1981). Adults learn differently from children, but no age-related differences in learning ability have been demonstrated for adults of different ages.

Older Learner Stereotypes

The stereotype of the older adult as a poor language learner can be traced to two roots: a theory of the brain and how it matures, and classroom practices that discriminate against the older learner.

A "critical period" hypothesis was put forth in the 1960's based on then-current theories of brain development. It was argued that the brain lost "cerebral plasticity" after puberty, making second language acquisition more difficult as an adult than as a child (Lenneberg, 1967).

More recent research in neurology has demonstrated that language learning is different in childhood and adulthood because of developmental differences in the brain, but that "in important respects adults have superior language learning capabilities" (Walsh & Diller, 1978). This is because the neural cells responsible for higher-order linguistic processes such as understanding semantic relations and grammatical sensitivity develop with age. Especially in the areas of vocabulary and language structure, adults are better language learners than children. Older learners have more highly developed cognitive systems, are able to make higher order associations and generalizations, and can integrate new language inputs into their already substantial learning experience. They rely on long-term memory rather than the short-term memory function used by children and younger learners for rote learning.

Age Related Factors In Language Learning

Health is an important factor in all learning, and many chronic diseases can affect the ability of the elderly to learn. Hearing loss affects many people as they age and can affect a person's ability to understand speech, especially in the presence of background noise. Visual acuity also decreases with age (although hearing and vision problems are not restricted to the older learner). It is important that the classroom environment compensate for visual or auditory impairments by combined audio and visual presentation of new material, good lighting, and elimination of outside noise (Joiner, 1981).

Classroom Practices

Certain language teaching methods may be inappropriate for older adults. For example, some methods rely primarily on good auditory discrimination for learning. Since hearing is one ability that often declines with age, this puts the older learner at a disadvantage.

Exercises such as oral drills and memorization, which rely

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on short-term memory, also discriminate against the adult learner. The adult learns best not by rote, but by integrating new concepts and material into already existing cognitive structures.

Speed is also a factor which works against the older student, so fast-paced drills and competitive exercises and activities may not be successful with the older learner.

Helping Older Adults Succeed

There are three major ways that teachers can make modifications in their programs to encourage the older adult language learner. These modifications include eliminating affective barriers, making the material relevant and motivating, and allowing the use of adult learning strategies.

Affective factors such as motivation and self-confidence are very important in language learning. Many older learners fear failure more than their younger counterparts. This may be due to their acceptance of the stereotype of the older person as a poor language learner or because of previously unsuccessful attempts to learn a foreign language. When such learners are faced with a stressful, fast-paced learning situation, the fears of failure only increase. The older person may exhibit greater hesitancy in learning. Teachers must be able to reduce anxiety and build self-confidence in the learner.

Class activities which include large amounts of oral repetition, extensive pronunciation correction, or an expectation of error-free speech will inhibit the older learner's active participation. On the other hand, providing opportunities for learners to work together, focusing on understanding rather than producing language, and reducing the focus on error correction can build learners' self-confidence and promote language learning. Teachers should emphasize the positive, focus on the good progress the learners are making and provide opportunities for them to be successful. This success can then be reinforced with more of the same.

Older adults learning a foreign language are usually learning it for a specific purpose: to be more effective professionally, to be able to survive in an anticipated foreign situation, or for other instrumental reasons. They are not willing to tolerate boring or irrelevant content, or lessons that stress the learning of grammar rules out of context. Adult learners need materials designed to present structures and vocabulary that will be of immediate use to them, in a context which reflects the situations and functions they will encounter when using the new language. Materials and activities that do not incorporate real life experiences will succeed with few older learners.

Older adults have already developed learning strategies that have served them well in other contexts. They can use these strategies to their advantage in language learning, too. Teachers should be flexible enough to allow different approaches to the learning task inside the classroom. For example, some teachers ask students not to write during the first language lessons. This can be very frustrating to those who know that they learn best through a visual channel.

Older adults with little formal education may also need to be introduced to strategies for organizing information. Many strategies used by learners have been identified; these can be incorporated into language training programs to provide a full range of possibilities for the adult learner (Oxford-Carpenter, 1985).

Conclusion

An approach which stresses the development of the receptive skills (particularly listening) before the productive skills may have much to offer the older learner (Postovsky, 1974; Winitz, 1981; J. Gary & N. Gary, 1981). According to this research, effective adult language training programs are those that use materials that provide an interesting and comprehensible message, delay speaking practice and emphasize the development of listening comprehension, tolerate speech errors in the classroom, and include aspects of culture and non-verbal language use in the instructional program. This creates a classroom atmosphere which supports the learner and builds confidence.

Teaching older adults should be a pleasurable experience. Their self-directedness, life experiences, independence as learners, and motivation to learn provide them with advantages in language learning. A program that meets the needs of the adult learner will lead to rapid language acquisition by this group.

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